

THE ANDAMAN ISLANDERS

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[535] their fires beside them. On the night of 4-5 April 1953, while I was sleeping with them in the communal hut at Berié-Abdalù a sudden storm drenched us all, forcing us to huddle together round fires under the more waterproof parts of the roof. Numb with cold, but cheerful, they began joking, singing¹ and dancing, men and women separately; this went on all night, and no one suffered any ill effects from the soaking.

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[264] The Onges lack of hygiene extends also to their cooking utensils, which are never washed. In recent years the ocean has provided the Onges with a generous and unexpected gift; currents running from the south of Asia have thrown up on to the shores of Little Andaman a shoal of empty petrol drums, stout metal cylinders 1.3 metres high and eighty centimetres in diameter. The astute Onges have patiently divided each one in two, each section big enough to take a large pig. Set on big fires these serve as wonderful cooking pots, and the Onges are delighted with them. Unfortunately, however, although they were thrown up all round the island, the supply is beginning to dry up, and they are rapidly being eaten away by rust.

252 To boil food, the Onges set the drums on two large logs, laid parallel, with a fire between them. Stones are rarely used to support the drums, although there are plenty about in the interior of the island. On the coast, and for a fair way inland, there is nothing but coral, hard but liable when it gets hot to disintegrate under the heavy weight of the cylinders filled to the brim.

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413 In these gifts from the sea the Onges could prepare tasty broths, but they invariably allow nearly all the water to boil away, and the cooking process is not considered complete until all the liquid has gone. While it is boiling, however, they take care not to lose the fat floating on the top, which they adore. They have even invented a curious sort of dipping-stick for the purpose of skimming the fat off. They take a shoot about twenty centimetres long from a plant which disintegrates into fibre when chewed. One end is chewed into a loose 'brush' and no one present misses his turn to dip it into the pot again and again to skim off a mouthful of fat, even getting up in the night in their eagerness for it. One stick naturally does for everyone, men, women and children, the

[91] ¹ The Onge voice is not markedly different from the European. It has a musical quality, fairly high-pitched but never shrill; the Onges never raise their voices, even in anger - disagreements invariably end in a dignified silence.